Mr. Mencken and the Jews

SHELDON L. RICHMAN

All I care to know is that a man is a human being—that is enough for me; he can't be any worse.
—Mark Twain, "Concerning the Jews"

Since *The Diary of H. L. Mencken* was published this past winter, Henry Louis Mencken, once considered the grand old man of American journalism, a literary critic of historic importance, and one of our most illustrious humorists, has become known as a bigot and in particular an anti-Semite. In the current intellectual atmosphere of high virtue and extreme ethnic touchiness, where a man can be done in by self-appointed heresy hunters for the least unfortunate utterance, the publication of the Mencken *Diary* has brought its author a furious posthumous public beating. In such an atmosphere, for an author, even a long-dead author, to be thought anti-Semitic—or racist, or insufficiently sympathetic to this or that ethnic or social group—can have serious consequences. Such authors are dropped from school curricula, their writings are removed from popular high school and college readers; the loss of their reputation results in a loss of respect for their work. They are cast out, beyond the pale, very much non grata.

The trouble began when Charles A. Fecher, the editor of *The Diary of H. L. Mencken* and hitherto an admirer of Mencken, wrote in his introduction to the *Diary*: "Let it be said at once, clearly and unequivocally: Mencken was an anti-Semite." Most major American newspapers picked up the story and played it big: the *New York Times*, for example, after running a news story also ran two op-ed pieces on the revelations of the *Diary*. Once the book was officially published, reviewers jumped in with an almost gleeful enthusiasm. The castigation of Mencken had gone so far that, in the *New York Review of Books*, a letter appeared signed by, among others, Louis Auchincloss and Ralph Ellison asking that the literary importance of H. L. Mencken not be forgotten and readers bring some historical perspective and understanding to his *Diary*.

But was Mencken an anti-Semite? Let's look at the evidence.

The *Diary* contains roughly thirty references to Jews. Mencken occasionally describes a person as a Jew, at times adding qualifiers, including "shrewd," "brisk, clever," "low-grade," and "young Harvard." He calls a woman a "French Jewess." He once or twice identifies Hollywood with "the Jews." In three other entries he notes, without comment, that Jews could not be members of the Maryland Club, of which he was a member, or be served at a restaurant in North Carolina. In another reference he reports Samuel Eliot Morison's remark that Jews did not make good history students at Harvard. In one entry he tells of how Bernard Smith, sales manager of Alfred A. Knopf, Mencken's publisher, proposed publication of a book of prayers during World War II. Mencken, a third-generation atheist, hated the idea, seeing in it a lowering

SHELDON L. RICHMAN is senior editor of the Institute for Humane Studies at George Mason University.

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of quality of the books published by the Knopf firm, of which he, Mencken, was a director, and confided to his diary: "What his [Smith's] name was before he changed it I do not know. He, too, is a Jew, and moreover, a jackass." In another entry, this one not published, but only mentioned by Fecher, Mencken lambastes two businessmen as "dreadful kikes" because they bought a distillery in Baltimore and let the product deteriorate.

Mencken has also been criticized for what is not in the *Diary*. For example, there is no denunciation of Hitler, though Mencken often denounced Hitler in his letters; about all he has to say about Hitler in the *Diary* is that a reporter described him as being "amiable" in private. This entry was made November 11, 1938, the day after *Kristallnacht*, which is also not mentioned.

For Fecher and many reviewers of the *Diary*, it is all quite damning. Moreover, this is not the first time Mencken was suspected of anti-Semitism. It came up in his lifetime and many times before the publication of the *Diary*. At the 1948 Progressive Party convention that nominated Henry Wallace for president, a motion was made to condemn Mencken as a Jew-baiter, among other things. (The chairman refused to entertain it.) In letters and published and unpublished writings, Mencken seemed to vent anti-Semitic feelings. In 1922, while on a ship bound for Germany, he wrote his brother August, "The Jews aboard outnumber the Christians by at least 15 to 1. They all seem to be department store buyers, and it is bad enough to look at them, without speaking to them." In unpublished notes he wrote that "the Jews are everywhere thought of as strangers and hence acquire the obligations of guests." He stated that "the Jew always makes the mistake of trying to regulate the society in which he finds himself." Several times he insisted that the Jews constitute a race, despite denials by Jewish people. (Ironically, some Israelis are now trying to prove that there is a Jewish race.) He argued that the Jewish notion of the Chosen People is partly responsible for anti-Semitism. He wrote that "Jewry as an organized body is almost unqualifiedly unpleasant," and added in another note that "it might be argued plausibly that most of them are inherently incapable of civilization."

Finally, on the prosecution side is Mencken's 1918 introduction to his translation of Nietzsche's *The Antichrist*, published by Knopf. In the middle of his complimenting the Jews for their salutary effects on the rising plutocracy in Europe, he wrote, "The case against the Jews is long and damning; it would justify ten thousand times as many pogroms as now go on in the world." From other Menckeniana and the fact he was introducing Nietzsche, we can deduce that the Jews' offense was the invention of Christianity. This is rough stuff nonetheless, even if it was written years before the Holocaust.

As every judge instructs during a criminal trial, however, the jury must not make up its mind before hearing the defendant's case. But what can possibly be said in Mencken's behalf? Turning to the *Diary* first, we must acknowledge that Mencken indeed sometimes, but not always, identifies Jews as such, though he also identifies others by their ethnic or national origin. He calls the publisher Harcourt a "clever Dutchman," for example. He does indeed abstain from commenting on the restrictive membership policies of institutions. But this is not unusual in the full context of the *Diary*. Mencken moralizes very little in the four-hundred-odd pages published (which is only one-third of the diary he kept for eighteen years, between the ages of fifty and his stroke at sixty-eight). Aside from railing against the impositions of Franklin Roosevelt, the editorial policy of the *Sunpapers*, and his friends who put drink before work, Mencken pronounces few judgments. He clearly did not intend his diary as a running commentary on world events: there is no mention of Pearl Harbor or D-Day; he barely mentions the end of the war. We just cannot deduce much from what is omitted from the *Diary*. What are we to make, for example, of his failure to write anything about the internment of the Japanese-Americans? It surely violated every principle of civil liberty Mencken held dear, and it was the dastardly act of "Roosevelt II" to boot. Yet—silence.

But for those who attack Mencken for omissions in his *Diary*, I have one: nowhere in the *Diary* does he blame the war he hates so much, World War II, on the Jews. In fact, nowhere does he blame "the Jews" for anything. One would expect this of a virulent anti-Semite. Yet, again, silence.

Why should Mencken have used his private diary to denounce Hitler's anti-Semitism? He could—and did—do it in *The American Mer-*

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cury. In his book column in the December 1933 issue, his last as editor, Mencken wrote about *Mein Kampf* and four books on the Third Reich. The article is a trenchant, solid put-down of the Nazis as a gang of demagogues who "harass and intimidate, flay and murder perfectly innocent and helpless people." Noting that anti-Semitism tends to flare up during public turmoil, he wrote:

> The disadvantage of the Jew is that, *to simple men*, he always seems a kind of foreigner. . . . He is commonly a fierce patriot in whatever land he lives in, and he certainly was, at least in most cases, in Germany during the war, but his patriotism is always ameliorated, despite its excess, by a touch of international-mindedness born of his history, and in consequence he is commonly held suspect by patriots *who can't see beyond their own frontiers*. Thus he is an easy mark for demagogues when *the common people* are uneasy, and it is useful to find a goat. . . . In Germany, as in Poland, Austria and France, he has been made use of by demagogues for many years, precisely as the colored brother has been made use of in our own South. (Emphasis added.)

Mencken went on to describe Hitler's association of Jews with Bolshevism as "in large part, imaginary, and at best . . . much exaggerated." Finally, he wrote that Hitler persuaded the "more credulous" of the Germans that the Jews were dangerous. "What followed," he wrote, "was certainly not creditable to the German people, nor indeed to the human race in general," referring to the ensuing "extravagant barbarities." Mencken thought that the Germans were too civilized to do anything but boot Hitler out, but he believed that if that didn't happen, there would be another world war.

By 1933 Mencken was a grizzled veteran in his concern for the Jews in Germany. In 1922 he had visited Germany to survey the damage of World War I and the Treaty of Versailles. In a letter from Munich to Paul Patterson, editor of the *Baltimore Sun*, he wrote, "Germany, so seen, presents a confusing and astounding spectacle. Outwardly everything looks serene (the communist outbreaks reported are chiefly no more than drunken fights), but every intelligent man looks for a catastrophe. If it comes, then there will be a colossal massacre of Jews." Many people foresaw catastrophe in the aftermath of World War I. How many feared it would befall the Jews?

More than a year before his *Mercury* article, Mencken published in the same magazine a piece titled "Theology in the American Courts" by one B. H. Hartogensis. It discussed, with much disdain, the fact that in eleven states of the Union, Jews and other non-Christians could either be barred from testifying in court or have their credibility impeached because they were not Christians. An acquaintance of Mencken's, Hartogensis was a Jewish lawyer and pawnbroker in Baltimore. On occasion he would describe the difficulties Jews had in the legal system of Maryland, one of the eleven states described. Mencken thought this unfair to Jews and asked a colleague on the *Baltimore Sun*, Philip Wagner, to take Hartogensis's facts and ghostwrite the article, which he did. Wagner/Hartogensis blasted "such capricious and irrelevant tests, barring the testimony of unbelievers" as "not merely a denial of justice, but a deprivation of property in conflict with the Fourteenth Amendment"—echoing, surely, the views of Mencken, the self-described "extreme libertarian" who believed in individual freedom "up to the limit of the unbearable, and even beyond." This overriding concern with liberty is what explains Mencken's opposition to the Red Scare of the twenties and his defense of Emma Goldman, the Jewish communist who was deported. For whatever it is worth, Wagner, who knew Mencken well, told me that the aspersions about him are "grotesque hogwash."

It has often been remarked, by Alistair Cooke, for example, that it is not true that some of Mencken's best friends were Jews; rather, *all* of his best friends were Jews. That is only a slight exaggeration. The publishers Alfred and Blanche Knopf, his longtime co-editor and theater critic George Jean Nathan, the publisher and producer Philip Goodman, the advertising executive Joseph Katz, the composer Louis Cheslock were his dearest friends. His beloved Saturday Night Club, which met to drink beer and play music, had Jewish members. He hired Charles Angoff, who was Jewish, as managing editor of *The American Mercury*. Perhaps his earliest collaborator, the physician Leonard Hirshberg, for whom he ghosted medical articles and a baby-care book in 1910, was Jewish. His earliest (1925) biographer, Isaac Goldberg, with whom he worked intimately, was Jewish. Of the two people he allowed to paint his por-

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trait, one, Nikol Schattenstein, was Jewish. The other, Oliver Richard Reid, was black.

Mencken associated so closely with Jews that people often thought he was Jewish. Throughout the twenties he was, to his delight, listed in the *Jewish Who's Who*, never correcting the editors, and G. K. Chesterton actually Jew-baited him, calling him "a clever and bitter Jew" and "a man with a sensitive race and a dead religion." Indeed, Mencken knew Jews as a boy in the Institute of F. Knapp, a Baltimore secondary school run by an old German whose curriculum included Hebrew lessons. (Mencken sat in for a while to learn his *aleph-bet*.) "There was no enmity between the Chosen and the *Goyim* in the old professor's establishment," Mencken wrote in his memoirs in the 1930s, "and no sense of difference in his treatment of them." It was here that Mencken picked up such Hebrew words, which he used reguarly, as *tokos*, *schlemihl*, and *mashuggah*. I find it curious that Mencken writes, "I must add in sorrow that the Jewish boys at Knapp's were unanimously *Chazirfresser*"—that is, pork-eaters who did not keep the dietary laws. Why was he sorry? Irony, perhaps. But there may be something else: Mencken apparently was annoyed with Jews who denied their heritage. Charles Fecher wrote in his introduction to the *Diary* that Mencken and Nathan had personal problems arising "out of what seems to him Nathan's effort to deny, or at all events to conceal, his Jewishness." Recall, too, how, with irritation, he wondered what Bernard Smith's real name was.

One would not expect an anti-Semite to point out the anti-Semitism of others and name it such. Yet this Mencken does twice in the *Diary*. He notes that the novelist Theodore Dreiser engaged in an "anti-Semitic tirade" against a publisher, and after asking the rabble-rouser Gerald L. K. Smith if he was an anti-Semite and Smith denies it, Mencken writes, "I am convinced that Gerald is preparing to get aboard the great anti-Semitic movement now rolling up in New York." That doesn't sound like an anti-Semite talking.

For every letter of Mencken's that calls Jews unpleasant, you can find one that tells his correspondent not to judge all Jews by any particular ones. He may call the Jews impatient, credulous, vain, and touchy, but he also called them a "race of poets." Carl Bode, Mencken's definitive biographer, writes that he "savored Jewish food, appreciated Jewish ritual and customs, and found a Jewish atmosphere congenial."

There is at least one man alive who can testify on this issue first-hand. Lawrence E. Spivak, who was the creator and moderator of NBC's "Meet the Press," became business manager of the *Mercury* after Mencken stepped down as editor at the end of 1933 and soon thereafter bought the magazine. He served as editor and publisher from 1944 to 1950, during which time he frequently published Mencken.

Mencken refers to Spivak twice in the *Diary*. In the December 3, 1934, entry, he writes of attending a special meeting of the directors of the Alfred A. Knopf Company, which at the time owned the *Mercury*. "Lawrence E. Spivak," Mencken writes, "who has been business manager of the *American Mercury* since I cleared out, has proposed to take over the magazine from the Knopf company, and the meeting was called to consider his offer. . . . It seems to me that the offer is a good one, and so I have voted for it.

"Spivak," Mencken continues, "is a young Harvard Jew, who took over the management of *Antiques* after leaving college and made a considerable success of it. Apparently he has no money, but he is energetic and intelligent." He goes on to compliment Spivak's performance at the *Mercury*.

"If he [Mencken] was anti-Semitic," Spivak told me when I interviewed him, "then he went out of his way to punish himself. It is absolutely nonsense to accuse Mencken of anti-Semitism. He always talked with his tongue in his cheek, but he always felt comfortable with Jews. He talked about Jews the way Jews talked about Jews."

Spivak, who is nearly ninety, explains Mencken's identification of people by their ethnic or religious affiliation as simply a manner of the times. "Those things didn't mean very much," he said. "He called me a Harvard Jew. Well, I was at Harvard and I am a Jew. The only real prejudice that Mencken had was pro-German." But Spivak quickly added that Mencken despised Hitler.

"I can remember that Mencken once said, 'I can't understand how any intelligent, civilized person could be anti-Semitic.' If Mencken was anything," Spivak added, "it was a libertarian. He believed in freedom. I just think we throw these things [charges of anti-Semitism] around too loosely."

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Through all the controversy over the *Diary of H. L. Mencken,* no one has taken care to define his terms. What, after all, is anti-Semitism? In *Semites and Anti-Semites,* Bernard Lewis distinguishes "normal prejudice" against Jews from anti-Semitism, which is the hatred of Jews grounded in the belief that they are a malignant influence in the world and should be controlled or eliminated.

If one judges Mencken by his writing and his conduct, the worst that can be said about him is that he held a partly unflattering stereotype of Jews, though it had nothing whatever to do with the malignancy assumed in the anti-Semite's doctrine. As a hard-core empiricist, Mencken must have thought his stereotype proceeded from his experience. As a principled individualist in both method and morals, however, he was ready and even eager to waive the negative part of the stereotype whenever a person possessed the virtues he revered: civility, honesty, integrity, devotion to productive work, competence, humor—the marks of what he called the "superior man." This is how he treated all groups and their members. And it clears up the apparent contradiction between Mencken's attitude toward "the Jews" and his high regard for so many individual Jews. Whatever we may call this, it is surely not anti-Semitism. Ethnic stereotyping is ubiquitous. What separates a reasonable man from a bigot is that the reasonable man looks for grounds to override negative stereotypes, and H. L. Mencken was a reasonable man.

Reasonable and magnanimous. In a letter of 1935 to Benjamin De Casseres, Mencken wrote: "A very definite anti-Semitic movement is gathering force behind the door, and whenever a convenient opportunity offers it will bust out. At that time you may trust me to mount the battlements and holler for the Chosen." More dramatically, in his January 1, 1939, *Sun* column, before there were Nazi death camps and when Hitler was still trying to expel the Jews, Mencken called on the United States to provide safe haven for them. He tore into the people who *talked* about the plight of the Jews without offering to *do* anything. Mencken wrote:

> It would be much more honest and much more humane to tackle the problem at once, and settle it without further ado. Either we are willing to give refuge to the German Jews, or we are not willing. If the former, then here is one vote for bringing them in by the first available ships, and staking them sufficiently to set them on their feet. That is the only way we can really help them and that is the only way we can avoid going down in history as hypocrites almost as grotesque as the English.

The column makes two other points: that the deed should be done quickly to shut up the "Ku Kluxers" and other anti-Semites, and that the American Jews should not be burdened with leading the campaign to amend the immigration quota. "They," Mencken wrote, "have enough troubles already, and are probably doomed to more hereafter." Instead, he continued, "the initiative should be taken by the so-called Christians who are so free with weasel words of comfort and flattery, and so curiously stingy with practical aid. In particular, it should be taken by the political mountebanks who fill the air with hollow denunciations of Hitler, and yet never lift a hand to help an actual Jew."

Later that year, in notes he never published, Mencken wrote, "The most outrageous of all the Nazi doctrines is the war to the general effect that Jews have no civil rights."

How important is the reputation of a man now dead almost thirty-five years? Only as important as truth and justice and clear thought.

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